

Tobias Wolff is probably best known for his short-story collections *Back in the World* (1985), *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs* (1981), and *The Night in Question* (1996) and for his novel *The Barracks Thief* (1984), which won the PEN/Faulkner Award in 1985. Wolff has also written two autobiographies. The first, *A Boy's Life* (1989), won the Los Angeles Times Book Award for biography and was made into a movie (1993) in which Wolff was played by Leonardo DiCaprio. The second autobiography, *In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of the Lost War* (1994), about his experience serving as a Green Beret in the Vietnam War, was a finalist for a National Book Award and a Los Angeles Times Award for biography. In addition to his fiction and autobiography, Wolff has also edited several short-story collections, including *The Best American Short Stories*. Wolff has taught creative writing at Syracuse University and is currently the Ward W. and Priscilola B. Woods Professor at Stanford University, where he also has directed the creative writing program.

In this selection from *A Boy's Life*, Wolff tells the story of an experience he had when he was ten years old. He and his mother had just moved west from Florida to Salt Lake City, followed by Roy, his divorced mother's boyfriend. "Roy was handsome," Wolff writes, "in the conventional way that appeals to boys. He had a tattoo. He'd been to war and kept a silence about it that was full of heroic implication." As you read, notice how the young Wolff is motivated, at least in part, by a desire to be the kind of self-sufficient man he associates with soldiers and cowboys.

On Being a Real Westerner

Tobias Wolff

Just after Easter Roy gave me the Winchester .22 rifle 1
I'd learned to shoot with. It was a light, pump-action,
beautifully balanced piece with a walnut stock black
from all its oilings. Roy had carried it when he was a boy
and it was still as good as new. Better than new. The
action was silky from long use, and the wood of a quality no longer to be found.

The gift did not come as a surprise. Roy was stingy, and slow to take a hint, but I'd 2
put him under siege. I had my heart set on that rifle. A weapon was the first condition of
self-sufficiency, and of being a real Westerner, and of all acceptable employment—
trapping, riding herd, soldiering, law enforcement, and outlawry. I needed that rifle, for
itself and for the way it completed me when I held it.

My mother said I couldn't have it. Absolutely not. Roy took the rifle back but 3
promised me he'd bring her around. He could not imagine anyone refusing him anything
and treated the refusals he did encounter as perverse and insincere. Normally mute, he
became at these times a relentless whiner. He would follow my mother from room to
room, emitting one ceaseless note of complaint that was pitched perfectly to jelly her
nerves and bring her to a state where she would agree to anything to make it stop.

After a few days of this my mother caved in. She said I could have the rifle if, and 4
only if, I promised never to take it out or even touch it except when she and Roy were
with me. Okay, I said. Sure. Naturally. But even then she wasn't satisfied. She plain
didn't like the fact of me owning a rifle. Roy said he had owned several rifles by the time
he was my age, but this did not reassure her. She didn't think I could be trusted with it.
Roy said now was the time to find out.

For a week or so I kept my promises. But now that the weather had turned warm Roy was usually off somewhere and eventually, in the dead hours after school when I found myself alone in the apartment, I decided that there couldn't be any harm in taking the rifle out to clean it. Only to clean it, nothing more. I was sure it would be enough just to break it down, oil it, rub linseed into the stock, polish the octagonal barrel and then hold it up to the light to confirm the perfection of the bore. But it wasn't enough. From cleaning the rifle I went to marching around the apartment with it, and then to striking brave poses in front of the mirror. Roy had saved one of his army uniforms and I sometimes dressed up in this, together with martial-looking articles of hunting gear: fur trooper's hat, camouflage coat, boots that reached nearly to my knees.

The camouflage coat made me feel like a sniper, and before long I began to act like one. I set up a nest on the couch by the front window. I drew the shades to darken the apartment, and took up my position. Nudging the shade aside with the rifle barrel, I followed people in my sights as they walked or drove along the street. At first I made shooting sounds—kyoo! kyoo! Then I started cocking the hammer and letting it snap down.

Roy stored his ammunition in a metal box he kept hidden in the closet. As with everything else hidden in the apartment, I knew exactly where to find it. There was a layer of loose .22 rounds on the bottom of the box under shells of bigger caliber, dropped there by the handful the way men drop pennies on their dressers at night. I took some and put them in a hiding place of my own. With these I started loading up the rifle. Hammer cocked, a round in the chamber, finger resting lightly on the trigger, I drew a bead on whoever walked by—women pushing strollers, children, garbage collectors laughing and calling to each other, anyone—and as they passed under my window I sometimes had to bite my lip to keep from laughing in the ecstasy of my power over them, and at their absurd and innocent belief that they were safe.

But over time the innocence I laughed at began to irritate me. It was a peculiar kind of irritation. I saw it years later in men I served with, and felt it myself, when unarmed Vietnamese civilians talked back to us while we were herding them around. Power can be enjoyed only when it is recognized and feared. Fearlessness in those without power is maddening to those who have it.

One afternoon I pulled the trigger. I had been aiming at two old people, a man and a woman, who walked so slowly that by the time they turned the corner at the bottom of the hill my little store of self-control was exhausted. I had to shoot. I looked up and down the street. It was empty. Nothing moved but a pair of squirrels chasing each other back and forth on the telephone wires. I followed one in my sight. Finally it stopped for a moment and I fired. The squirrel dropped straight into the road. I pulled back into the shadows and waited for something to happen, sure that someone must have heard the shot or seen the squirrel fall. But the sound that was so loud to me probably seemed to our neighbors no more than the bang of a cupboard slammed shut. After a while I sneaked a glance into the street. The squirrel hadn't moved. It looked like a scarf someone had dropped.

When my mother got home from work I told her there was a dead squirrel in the street. Like me, she was an animal lover. She took a cellophane bag off a loaf of bread and we went outside and looked at the squirrel. "Poor little thing," she said. She stuck

her hand in the wrapper and picked up the squirrel, then pulled the bag inside out away from her hand. We buried it behind our building under a cross made of popsicle sticks, and I blubbered the whole time.

I blubbered again in bed that night. At last I got out of bed and knelt down and did an imitation of somebody praying, and then I did an imitation of somebody receiving divine reassurance and inspiration. I stopped crying. I smiled to myself and forced a feeling of warmth into my chest. Then I climbed back in bed and looked up at the ceiling with a blissful expression until I went to sleep. 11

For several days I stayed away from the apartment at times when I knew I'd be alone there. 12

Though I avoided the apartment, I could not shake the idea that sooner or later I would get the rifle out again. All my images of myself as I wished to be were images of myself armed. Because I did not know who I was, any image of myself, no matter how grotesque, had power over me. This much I understand now. But the man can give no help to the boy, not in this matter nor in those that follow. The boy moves always out of reach. 13

Connecting to Culture and Experience: Role Playing

Wolff shows us that he took great delight in playing the role of a soldier—looking at himself in the mirror dressed in camouflage and “striking brave poses” (paragraph 5). The word *brave* suggests that the young Wolff wanted to see himself as possessing certain traits, like bravery, that we often associate with soldiers. Another part of the attraction of playing soldier, he admits, is the sense of power he experienced holding a rifle.

With other students in your class, discuss the roles you played as children. What personal and cultural factors influenced the roles that you and your classmates imagined for yourselves? You might begin by comparing your own childhood imaginings with Wolff's desire to play soldier. In addition to having firsthand experience with Roy, a soldier who impressed him with his masculine authority and power, Wolff grew up during World War II, when children were bombarded by media images of brave soldiers fighting heroic wars and lone cowboys bringing justice to the Wild West. What media images—from television, film, the Internet, and computer games—do you think influenced the kinds of role play that you engaged in as a child or young adult?

Analyzing Writing Strategies

1. Writers convey the **significance** of autobiographical events by telling how they felt at the time the event occurred and by telling how they feel now as they look back on the event. Skim paragraphs 7, 8, and 13, noting where Wolff expresses his feelings and thoughts about the event. Try to distinguish between what he remembers thinking and feeling at the time and what he thinks and feels as he looks back on the event. What impression do you get of the young Wolff? What does the adult Wolff seem to think about his younger self?